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ABSTRACT

As part of a larger research effort, a study was conducted to determine the coping strategies used by families undergoing unemployment. Data were collected from a 95-item questionnaire (developed and tested at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln) that was mailed to 150 persons and/or their spouses who were currently unemployed or had been unemployed in the past. Ninety-five questionnaires (from 45 males and 50 females) were returned, for a response rate of 63.6 percent. The respondents, all residents of Omaha, Nebraska, were asked to express in narrative form their feelings about unemployment and the crisis they experienced. The F-COPES instrument (Family Crisis Oriented Personal Evaluation Scale) was included in the questionnaire to measure family coping patterns. The overall test-retest reliability of the F-COPES was .81. Results suggest that unemployment is a traumatic event for the unemployed person and all members of the family system. Job loss affects families psychologically, socially, and financially. (Author/KC)

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COPING STRATEGIES OF UNEMPLOYED FAMILIES

Charlyn R. Shickell, Ph.D.

Paper presented at the national conference of the American Association of Adult and Continuing Education held in Tulsa, Oklahoma, November, 1988.

The data reported in this paper are part of a larger research study to fulfill dissertation requirements at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE.

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the coping strategies used by families undergoing unemployment. Data collected from a 95-item questionnaire, developed and tested at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln since 1975, was mailed to 150 persons and/or their spouses who were currently unemployed or had been unemployed in the past. Ninety-five questionnaires (45 males and 50 females) were returned for a response rate of 63.6 percent. The respondents all lived in Omaha, NE and were asked to express in narrative form their feelings about unemployment and the crisis they experienced. The F-COPES instrument, Family Crisis Oriented Personal Evaluation Scale, was included in the questionnaire and measured family coping patterns. The overall test-retest reliability of the F-COPES was .81. Results of this study suggest that unemployment is a traumatic event for the unemployed individual and all members of the family system. Job loss affects families psychologically, socially and financially.

INTRODUCTION

All families, functional and dysfunctional, experience stress because of changes that occur at various times throughout the life cycle of the family. However, a question remains as to why some families recover from the stress of change and, in fact, become stronger, whereas other families cannot cope and move toward increasing dysfunction. Unemployment and the resulting financial hardships which occur are among the most difficult circumstances faced by families. The financial and emotional havoc caused by unemployment may have consequences for the stability of the family system (Komarovsky, 1971).

Work is a fundamental part of the adult experience and plays a significant role in economic, social, and psychological well-being (Tiffany, 1970). When a breadwinner of the family is out of work, there is a psychological impact upon the entire family system. Counselors across the country have reported increased client loads which consist of families trying to cope with the many stressors involved with unemployment. In the Midwest, farm families attempting to survive the current economic farm crisis have sought professional help to resolve their dilemmas. Professionals in their late forties and fifties who become unemployed may not find meaningful employment again and are forced to accept low-paying jobs to support their families which may include teenagers preparing to enter college. Early retirement has produced unsettling times for the workers so affected. As the economy of the country fluctuates, so does unemployment and the resulting stressors upon the family system. The experience

of unemployment can be physically and mentally debilitating to its victims and their families. Feelings of low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, hostility, and hopelessness affect not only the unemployed but the entire family structure. The prevailing philosophy of mainstream America which implies, "If you want to work, you can!" adds to family stressors. Work is the means whereby a person finds his or her identity. For most adults, being without work is not living. Adults are provided with the reason and means by which to live through work; it is an integral part of the very fabric of our lives.

Family hardships increase during times of crisis, and it is often amazing to see the tenacity and courage of families who are determined to survive and thrive under conditions that for many can only be described as desperate. Such families are known as "survivors." The spouse and children who have denied themselves the luxuries of life and even necessities to survive are included in this group. The spouse of the unemployed person often bears the brunt of the unemployment crisis for it falls on his or her shoulders to carry the emotional needs of the family system. The spouse of the unemployed worker must remain sane and hold the family together, many times single-handedly, while the unemployed spouse tries to regain his or her self-esteem and face the horror of one closed door after another. The roles of the family shift, and feelings of social alienation increase. The changing roles can increase fatigue and ill health for the spouse attempting to keep order within the family. Spouses know if they do not hold

up during the strain the entire family system may collapse. Spouses also feel the burden and responsibility for the mental and emotional well-being of the unemployed spouses and feel the effects of their depression and increasing despair.

The spouse of the unemployed person may experience a feeling of helplessness and find himself or herself unable to cope with the other spouse's feelings of rejection, frustration, guilt, and blame. Desertion and marital breakdowns are particularly common among families of the unemployed (Cavan, 1959). If the family system is not healthy and functional to begin with, its greatest weaknesses will surface during crisis and threaten to destroy it. If the family unit is strong and healthy before the crisis strikes, it will probably use coping mechanisms developed previously to weather the current crisis.

It is not surprising to see divorce rates spiral upwards during economic hardships (Briar, 1978; Ginsburg, 1942; Komarovsky, 1971). Child abuse and spouse abuse increase; drug abuse and alcoholism become intolerable and can produce a pile-up of stressors (Daughtry, 1981; Duggan, 1981; Komarovsky, 1971; Petit, 1981).

The bulk of the research on unemployment has emanated from labor economists, who conceptualize and measure variables in terms of sex, type of skill, period of unemployment, etc. While interesting, this does not identify the feelings and behavioral dynamics behind the statistics. Most researchers of unemployment have studied the Great Depression and its effect upon blue-collar workers and their families.

Cooley and Catalino (1979) stated tnat prospective monitoring of family coping strategies during unemployment would not only help clarify the relationship between economic change and catastrophic measures such as suicide and institutionalization, but would also help identify successful and unsuccessful coping strategies. According to Dooley and Catalino, such information would be invaluable to mental health workers who deal with families.

THE PRESENT STUDY

The purpose of the study being reported in this paper was designed to determine the specific coping patterns utilized by families experiencing unemployment.

METHOD

Respondents in this study all resided in the City of Omaha, Nebraska. Omaha, as a national test city represents a microcosm of the United States market, based on a 1985 study done by A. C. Nielsen and reported in American Demographics (Walsh, 1985). In his study, Nielsen looked at the demographics of potential test cities and identified the top ten test market cities in the nation.

A 95-item questionnaire for unemployed persons and their spouses was developed for data collection. The questionnaire was developed and tested in the Department of Human Development and the Family, University of Nebraska-Lincoln. The questionnaire obtained general information as well as information dealing specifically with the unemployment experience and the ability to recover from the crisis.

Respondents were able to express in narrative form their feelings about the unemployment experience and the crisis they personally felt as well as how the event impacted upon their family. Questions were adopted from the literature of family-crisis studies and from pilot study information gained from families participating in preliminary studies.

The Family Crisis Oriented Personal Scales (F-COPES) instrument was used in addition to the researcher's questionnaire to measure internal and external coping patterns of the participants in the study. The reliability and validity of the F-COPES have been established through research done on 2,749 families. The authors, McCubbin, Olson, and Larsen (1979), are noted researchers in the field of family studies.

A list of 3,000 random numbers from the Omaha, Nebraska telephone directory was obtained from the Sociology Department at the University of Nebraska for the purpose of obtaining respondents who had experienced unemployment either currently or in the past. Telephone calls were place to numbers on the above list and one-half of the respondents were located. The other one-half of the respondents resulted from a snowball effect because of information received from one of the telephone calls regarding a newly formed unemployed professional support group in the City of Omaha.

As respondents located by telephone calls agreed to participate in the study, the questionnaire was sent to the unemployed person and spouse, if married, along with a cover letter explaining the study and thanking the unemployed person and spouse for their participation.

A self-addressed, stamped envelope was also included for the return of the completed questionnaires. The questionnaires were designed to allow participants the option of remaining anonymous; however, if they wished to receive the study results they were instructed to write their name and address in the space provided on the questionnaire.

RESULTS

A total of 95 respondents participated in this study, with a total of 45 (47.4%) males and 50 (52.6%) females. There were 23 couples participating in the study, along with 49 persons, either married or single, to represent a total of 72 families. The participants were either unemployed currently, had experienced unemployment in the past, or were married to someone who had experienced unemployment. The sample of participants lived in the greater Omaha, Nebraska area and completed the questionnaires between May, 1988 and September, 1988. The participants were contacted by telephone from a random telephone list from the Omaha telephone directory. One out of every six telephone calls resulted in a respondent for this research because someone in the household was currently unemployed or had been unemployed in the past. A total of 150 questionnaires was sent to respondents, with 95 respondents returning them for a return rate of 63.3 percent. Fifty-five respondents did not return the questionnaires. Of these, 38 persons could not be contacted because they had moved to new locations between May, 1988 and September, 1988, and had not left forwarding addresses or telephone numbers, indicating the transient nature of the population studied. Nine of the non-participants indicated they could not participate in the research at this time because it was too personal and too difficult for them to complete at this time. Two refused to

participate because their unemployment had been so brief they did not believe their answers would be appropriate to the study. Four persons stated they were too busy pursuing employment to take time for the study. One person in his early fifties died of a heart attack, and another person was killed in an automobile accident.

The demographic characteristics of the sample indicate an age range of 24 to 69 years; the mean age was 45. Thirty-six (38%) of the respondents were between the ages of 40 and 49; 32 (33%) respondents were between 50 and 59 years of age, and five (5.3%) respondents were 60 years of age and older.

Three (3.2%) of the respondents had some grade school education, and three respondents (3.2%) had some high school education. Sixteen of the respondents (17%) graduated from high school. Two respondents (2.1%) had some trade-technical school training. Twenty-two (23.4%) respondents had a college degree, and 14 (14.9%) had attended a graduate/professional school. Eighteen respondents (19.1%) held post-graduate or professional degrees.

The majority of the respondents (67) were currently married (70.5%); 13 (13.7%) were divorced. One (1.1%) respondent was divorced and remarried; three (3.2%) were widowed; three (3.2%) were separated from their spouse, and eight (8.3%) reported never being married. The years married ranged from two months to 44 years.

The majority of the respondents were Caucasian (85); four respondents were Native American, two were Black, three were Hispanic, and one was Oriental.

Ten respondents reported a total of 19 children 20 years and under; the majority of the respondents reported grown children over 20 years of age. Twenty-nine respondents (30.5%) were currently unemployed; 35 (36.9%) were employed full-time. 17 (17.9) were employed part-time; 6 (6.3%) were self-employed; 4 (4.2%) were retired; 2 (2.1%) were students; and 2 (2.1%) listed "other."

Twenty (21.1%) respondents listed their preferred occupation as businessman/businesswoman; 9 (9.5%) were semi-skilled/unskilled workers; 5 (5.3%) were skilled workers; 17 (17.9%) were listed as clerical; 30 (31.5%) were listed as professional; 14 (14.7%) were listed as "other."

The F-COPES instrument to measure family coping strategies consists of five subscales measuring two dimensions of family interaction: Internal Family Coping Patterns and External Family Coping Patterns. Items are rated on a five-point Likert-type scale.

Internal coping strategies refer to the ways individual members deal with difficulties by using resources within their own families. Three conceptual scales, Confidence in Problem Solving, Reframing Family Problems, and Family Passivity, make up the Internal Family Coping Patterns of F-COPES.

External Family Coping Patterns refer to the behaviors family members employ to acquire resources outside their families. Five conceptual subscales, Church/Religious Resources, Extended Family, Friends, Neighbors, and Community Resources, comprise the external dimension of F-COPES.

Factor analysis with varimax rotation was completed on the eight conceptual scales. Cronbach's Alpha was computed on each factor separately with the alpha reliability for the Internal Family Coping Patterns being .83 as compared to a .66 reliability for the norm group used by McCubbin, Olson, and Larsen (1981) in developing the F-COPES instrument. The alpha reliability for the External Family Coping Patterns was .84 as compared with .77 for the norm group.

The respondents most frequently used Community Resources, an external strategy, followed by Confidence in Family Problem Solving and Reframing Family Problems, internal strategies. Extended Family, an external strategy, was fourth; Church/Religion, an external strategy, was fifth; followed by Neighbors, an external strategy, sixth; Family Passivity, an internal strategy, seventh; and Friends, an external strategy, last.

Thirty items measure the five subscales of the F-COPES instrument: 1) Acquiring Social Support, (2) Reframing, (3) Seeking Spiritual Support, (4) Mobilizing Family to Acquire and Accept Help, and (5) Passive Appraisal.

The Acquiring Social Support subscale consists of nine items to measure a family's ability to actively engage in acquiring support from relatives, friends, neighbors, and extended family.

The Reframing subscale includes eight items which assess the family's capability to redefine stressful events in order to make them more manageable.

Four items measure the Seeking Spiritual Support subscale which focuses on the family's ability to acquire spiritual support.

Mobilizing Family to Acquire and Accept Help is the fourth subscale which measures the family's ability to seek out community resources and accept help from others. This is measured by four items.

The Passive Appraisal subscale includes four items which assess the family's ability to accept problematic issues minimizing reactivity.

Factor analysis with varimax rotation replicating the statistics used by the authors of the F-COPES instrument (McCubbin & Patterson, 1987) was completed on the thirty items with seven strong factors emerging. Seven factors had eigenvalues greater than one. Cronbach's Alpha was computed on each factor separately and on the total scale to establish an Alpha reliability of .81. This compares favorable with the McCubbin, Olson, and Larsen norm group instrument reliability of .77.

Of the five subscales, Mobilizing Family to Acquire and Accept Help, an external strategy, was used most frequently, followed by Reframing, an internal strategy, second, and Seeking Spiritual Support, an external strategy, third. Coping strategies less frequently used were Acquiring Social Support, an external strategy, and Passive Appraisal, an internal strategy.

It was hypothesized that men and women would utilize different coping patterns when coping with the unemployment crisis. Each of the five subscales was measured by t tests which determined there

was no statistical differences between gender in any of the five subscales measuring coping patterns.

DISCUSSION

This descriptive study revealed the effects of unemployment upon individuals and the families to which they belonged. This portrayal of families highlights the problems encountered by unemployed individuals who continue to believe, after months of joblessness, that a good job is "around the corner." If the respondents had been seeking jobs during good economic times, their experiences would probably have been different. Unemployment compensation, savings, or a loan might have tided them over until they found new jobs. But because unemployment was relatively high during a downturn in the midwestern farm economy, they could not find work and they encountered hardship and keen competition for jobs. Joblessness brought more than just financial problems to the families it touched. They were affected psychologically and socially as well. Some survived the unemployment which ranged from one month to sixteen years with the help of unemployment compensation (52%); others (25%) went into debt or borrowed from family members (24%); still others lived off their savings (68%) or received welfare benefits (6%). Twenty-five percent resorted to borrowing from banks. Some sold their homes while other families managed to survive the unemployment with other family members going to work. All the families pared down their budgets and cut every unnecessary item. In many instances, even necessities were deleted and life became an exercise in survival. Loss of health and life insurance brought further stress, and necessary treatment by a doctor was often postponed until it became critical.

Age was no barrier as the tentacles of unemployment touched young and old alike. The youngest subject was a 24-year-old being treated for alcohol/drug addiction following six months of unemployment. The oldest respondent was a 69-year-old male who recounted his memories of unemployment during his late fifties. The surprising and somewhat discouraging revelation of the research was the large number of unemployed professionals (30%) and businessmen/women (20%). For them, it was a crisis they were ill-prepared to meet having prepared themselves for a career with college and postgraduate degrees. It was the unbelievable happening that shocked many of these individuals and their families into psychological numbness. The stigma of their unemployment dissipated their defenses, and they often retreated into their homes hiding from neighbors, friends, and relatives. The fact they did not understand or empathize with them only added insult to injury. The homes in which they sought solace often became psychologically embattled as only 56 percent reported receiving the emotional support they needed from their spouses and 41 percent received needed support from their children. Some no longer felt respected by their children or spouse. Tensions mounted because of the financial hardships, and children resented not having their needs met. Marital satisfaction was significantly affected in 35 percent of the families studied. Twenty-one percent reported a decrease in marital satisfaction, and 14 percent reported an increase in marital satisfaction. Six of the respondents had considered a divorce during unemployment, and one separated from his spouse as a direct result

of the unemployment experience. Four respondents divorced in the aftermath of job loss. It would appear that for the intact families, the trauma of the unemployment would affect the individual members for many years to come. One wife reported there was no joy when her husband found work, only relief with underlying fear that it might happen again. Forty-one percent said the crisis brought them closer together as a family while nine percent reported it pulled them apart.

Self-introspection was mentioned frequently as the unemployed individuals sought to work within the system to find employment. Anger was expressed at the lack of empathy from the unemployment counselors. Perhaps the frustration most often felt was the inadequacy of the system to help them find a job. They facillated between being hopeful at find a better job "soon" and feeling depressed and hopeless when it did not happen. They sought to upgrade their job skills and improve their job-hunting techniques and felt betrayed when none of these efforts were rewarded with a job, especially when they "knew" they were the best qualified candidate. Frustrations grew as many realized their age was a liability in competing for available jobs and they were no longer seen as a viable candidate by prospective employers. They resented joining the world of the retired senior citizen or "newly aged" before their time, especially when their children were at an age when their needs were now beyond the family budget. Some reported their children had to drop out of college, and others expressed resentment and guilt they couldn't give their daughters the weddings they wanted. Others reported the burden of providing for

elderly parents and college-age children at the same time.

As their distress and vulnerability deepened, they experienced numerous health problems ranging from insomnia to panic attacks and depression. One unemployed subject died an untimely death of a heart attack. Those who were close to him stated he just "gave up." Research by the health profession concurs with the results of this study regarding the physiological effects stress can have on the human body. Physicians have said that one can literally die of a "broken heart." Perhaps nothing is quite so disturbing as the loss of one's ability to earn a livelihood, to be a productive member of society, and to feel pride in contributions to one's world. That may be the biggest tragedy of all! For these the great American dream turned out to be a myth after all, and the work ethic a cruel hoax. Success is no longer attainable by a certain formula. Sixty-six percent reported they no longer looked at life in the same way. Eight percent stated they would "never recover" from the unemployment experience.

Life for this generation was no longer better than what their ancestors enjoyed. They felt betrayed by the very system they supported. The sense of personal failure and worthlessness was an often repeated theme.

TABLE 1

F-COPES QUESTIONS LISTED IN FIVE SUB-SCALES[1]

I. MOBILIZING FAMILY TO ACQUIRE AND ACCEPT HELP

1. Seeking information and advice from persons in other families who have faced the same or similar problems.
2. Seeking assistance from community agencies and programs designed to help families in our situation.
3. Seeking information and advice from the family doctor.
4. Seeking professional counseling and help for family difficulties.

II. REFRAMING

1. Knowing we have the power to solve major problems.
2. Knowing that we have the strength within our own family to solve our problems.
3. Facing the problems "head-on" and trying to get solution right away.
4. Showing that we are strong.
5. Accepting stressful events as a fact of life.
6. Accepting that difficulties occur unexpectedly.
7. Believing we can handle our own problems.
8. Defining the family problem in a more positive way so that we do not become too discouraged.

III. SEEKING SPIRITUAL SUPPORT

1. Attending church services.
2. Participating in church activities.
3. Seeking advice from a minister.
4. Having faith in God.

IV. ACQUIRING SOCIAL SUPPORT

1. Sharing our difficulties with relatives.
2. Seeking encouragement and support from friends.
3. Seeking advice from relatives (grandparents, etc.)
4. Receiving gifts and favors from neighbors (e.g. food, taking in mail, etc.)
5. Asking neighbors for favors and assistance.
6. Sharing concerns with close friends.
7. Doing things with relatives (get to-gethers, dinners, etc.)
8. Asking relatives how they feel about problems we face.
9. Sharing problems with neighbors.

V. PASSIVE APPRAISAL

1. Watching television.
*2. Knowing luck plays a big part in how well we are able to solve family problems.
*3. Feeling that no matter what we do to prepare, we will have difficulty handling problems.
*4. Believing if we wait long enough, the problem will go away.

*These items must be reversed when scoring

[1] McCubbin, H. I., & Thompson, A. I. (Eds.) (1987). Family assessment inventories for research and practice. Madison: University of Wisconsin.

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